

THE GIORGIO DE CHIRICO - JACQUES SELIGMANN & CO. EPISTOLARY  
MILAN - PARIS - NEW YORK, 1938  
A MISSED EXHIBITION

*Katherine Robinson*

In 1938, after a period of sixteen months in America, Giorgio de Chirico left New York, a city he described as mysterious, magnificent and eternally New<sup>1</sup>, to return to Europe with his companion Isabella Pakszwer. The artist embarked on the *SS Rex* at the beginning of January and was eager to continue developing the American market thanks to his recent, positive experience and the interest shown in his work (fig. 1). During his stay, de Chirico had consolidated important professional relationships, primarily with Julien Levy, whose gallery hosted two solo shows of his work<sup>2</sup>, and with patron of the Arts Albert C. Barnes, whose support de Chirico had enjoyed for many years at that point and who had been of great help to the artist during his stay. In the wake of the professional success achieved, and with the intention of consolidating it, de Chirico endeavoured to establish new business relationships and projects, in particular with the Jacques Seligmann & Co. Inc. Gallery<sup>3</sup>, for an exhibition of his paintings. Unfortunately, not only did this relationship not produce the desired results, but de Chirico later found himself engaged in a long and arduous endeavour in order to terminate the agreement undertaken with the gallery. Initially planned for the beginning of January 1938, the exhibition was postponed to the end of the year by which time the artist had re-established himself in Europe, living between Milan and Paris. The exhibition proved very difficult to organise from afar and was cancelled, in a rapid-fire exchange of telegrams, just one week before the opening.

The de Chirico – Seligmann correspondence presented here shows the business procedures undertaken whilst revealing a formal, difficult working relationship that lacked a true cultural understanding between the two parties. The epistolary comprises of sixteen letters by the artist

<sup>1</sup> G. de Chirico, *J'ai été a New York*, "XX Siècle", 1 March 1938; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1 (1911-1945). Romanzi e Scritti critici e teorici*, A. Cortellessa, ed., A. Bonito Oliva, dir., Bompiani, Milan 2008, pp. 522-527. English translation *I Have Been to New York*, in *De Chirico and America*, curated by E. Braun, The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, New York, 10 September - 26 October 1996, Umberto Allemandi & C., Turin 1996, pp. 136-138; now in "Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgo Isa de Chirico" n. 7/8, Le Lettere, Florence, Pictor O, Rome 2008, pp. 683-684.

<sup>2</sup> *Recent Paintings by Giorgio de Chirico*, 27 October - 17 November 1936 and *Recent Paintings and Gouaches - Giorgio de Chirico*, Julien Levy Gallery, New York, 15-31 December 1937.

<sup>3</sup> Established in Paris in 1880, Jacques Seligmann & Cie. originally dealt in antiques and decorative arts. The New York branch opened in 1904 and from 1920 onwards was directed by Jacques' son, Germain Seligmann, who was instrumental in the introduction of modern art to the business. From 1926, Jacques Seligmann & Co. Inc. was located at 3 East 51<sup>st</sup> Street, New York. The gallery enjoyed a clientele of important collectors such as J. P. Morgan, A. C. Barnes, Bernheim-Jeune, Georges Blumethal as well as important museums and institutions, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery of Art.

dated 1937-1939<sup>4</sup> and just as many from Seligmann & Co. This material is enriched by the second half of the de Chirico and Julien Levy epistolary (1938-1948)<sup>5</sup>, pertaining to the recovery of twenty-eight paintings entrusted to the Seligmann gallery and their return to Italy. This study retraces the artist's activity and travels during the years prior to the Second World War and those immediately after, with his permanent move to Rome and settling into the apartment in Piazza di Spagna, as well as the formalisation of his relationship with Isabella, who became his wife in May 1946. Further



fig. 1 Giorgio de Chirico, New York, c. 1937

to the story of an unsuccessful business endeavour, the correspondence sheds light on a period of transition for the artist, both on a personal level as well as a professional one, as well as providing indications on the evolution of his work. Having cultivated his business affairs for years in a number of European countries, the acquisition of the North American market meant a considerable expansion in the artist's enterprising, which also entailed a substantial logistic/organisational effort on his part.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Seligmann & Co. Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington. I would like to offer a special thank you to Wendy Hurlock Baker, Rights and Reproduction Coordinator, AAA, for her precious help. The de Chirico letters conserved in the archive are handwritten in French with the exception of those sent from 8-15 December 1938 that are typewritten in English. The letters from the gallery to the artist are typewritten in English, as are the two contracts conserved in the archive. The letters by de Chirico cited in the article are published in full, in the original French and in English, in the section Writings by Giorgio de Chirico, pp. 356-371.

<sup>5</sup> The first part of the Giorgio de Chirico - Julien Levy epistolary (1934-1936) was published in "Metafisica", n. 7/8, cit., pp. 672-678 and examined in my essay *Giorgio de Chirico - Julien Levy. Artist and Art Dealer - Shared Experience*, pp. 326-356. The letters by de Chirico to Levy are handwritten in French. In the spring of 2009, the Jean and Julien Levy Foundation for the Arts, Newton, Connecticut, donated the Julien Levy archival papers to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania, where they are presently conserved. A special thank you, as always, to Marie Difilippantonio of the Jean and Julien Levy Foundation for the Arts for her support. The letters by de Chirico cited in the article are published in full, in the original French and in English translation, in the section Writings by Giorgio de Chirico, pp. 372-392.

Right away, the project for an exhibition of Giorgio de Chirico's works at the Seligmann gallery got off on the wrong foot. The initial agreement was made verbally between the artist and Germain Seligmann, as gathered from the first letter in the archive, dated 24 May 1937, in which de Chirico wrote that he had understood that the project had been cancelled: "as almost an entire month has gone by since the last time we met, on which occasion you told me that I would receive a letter from you the next day, and not having received anything, I thought you had renounced the project of my exhibition and, not wanting to insist further, I have made arrangements with another gallery". In closing, he wished the gallerist happy holidays, saying that he hoped, in any case, to do something together. Conserved in the Seligmann archive is the original copy of a contract-letter dated 11 May 1937, delineating the date of the exhibition (3 January 1938 for three weeks) and the economic conditions regarding expenses and proceeds of sales, which also specifies the absence of insurance coverage for works left on consignment. The fact that de Chirico makes no mention of this contract in his letter can be interpreted in two ways: either he did not receive the contract at all, or, he received it, but much later than had been established in their verbal agreement and as such no longer considered it applicable. The first of these possibilities is the most probable one, since the contract conserved in the gallery archive is, in fact, the original typewritten document on letterhead stationary signed by the gallery owner, and not a carbon copy. It would indeed seem that the contract was prepared but not sent. At the start of the letter in which de Chirico expresses with regret his change of plans to Seligmann, he states: "I was just about to pass by to see you today". Whatever the case may be, the statement makes one wonder if he might have been responding to a recent communication from the gallery.

It seems that the initial *pourparler* with the gallery took place the previous month, as understood by a letter de Chirico wrote to Giovanni Scheiwiller on 6 April 1937, in which he gave the editor news of his work in the United States, and in *post scriptum* announced: "I have arranged for a big exhibition of my paintings for the autumn at the Seligmann Gallery, which is the best and most luxurious gallery in New York."<sup>6</sup> At the end of April, the artist wrote to Albert C. Barnes as well, asking his advice on his prospective exhibitions for the coming year.<sup>7</sup> The letter is one of many that demonstrate the important role Barnes played as advisor to the artist during his stay in America. De Chirico, after thanking his patron for the interest he had shown, goes on to ask his opinion about two galleries where he was considering exhibiting his work, Seligmann's and the Wildenstein Gallery<sup>8</sup>. He also informed him of his imminent departure for Europe at the end of May<sup>9</sup> and his

<sup>6</sup> G. de Chirico to G. Scheiwiller, 6 April 1937, copy of handwritten letter, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico Archives.

<sup>7</sup> G. de Chirico to A. C. Barnes, 25 April 1937, handwritten letter, President's Files, Albert C. Barnes Correspondence, The Barnes Foundation Archives, Merion, PA.

<sup>8</sup> When de Chirico mentioned in his letter to Seligmann that he had made arrangements with another gallery, it is probable that this was, in fact, the Wildenstein Gallery, seeing that six months later, on 21 October 1937, he wrote to Barnes asking him if he was willing to write "an introduction for the exhibition I will be holding at Wildenstein's in the winter". For unknown reasons, the exhibition did not take place.

<sup>9</sup> De Chirico arrived in New York at the end of August 1936. In a letter sent to Barnes in December, he spoke of his intention to stay in New York to work until the spring: "I have rented an apartment in New York where I intend to stay and work until the spring." G. de Chirico to A. C. Barnes, 28 December 1936, handwritten letter, *ibid.*

intention to return to New York again the following winter. Barnes replied three days later and said that he considered Wildenstein the better of the two.<sup>10</sup>

De Chirico did not leave for Europe at the end of May 1937<sup>11</sup>, but stayed on and spent “the terrible American summer” in Bayville, Long Island, in a “humid, colonial heat”<sup>12</sup> while preparing his second solo show for the Julien Levy Gallery in the autumn.<sup>13</sup> During this period he had to deal with a number of problems concerning his residence permit and consulted with lawyers in order to prepare a formal request for immigration to the United States. The situation preoccupied him to the extent that he felt he would not have sufficient time to prepare the exhibition and might have to give up the idea, as he wrote to Levy on 25 August 1937.<sup>14</sup> After the spring of 1937, de Chirico had stayed on in New York with the conviction that he could make a living in America. However, at that time his personal situation was complex, due to the fact that he was still married to his first wife Raissa Gourevitch, whilst having lived for the past seven years with Isabella, who was even mistaken as his wife in New York. The situation was anything but simple due to his legal and financial responsibility to Raissa, who was living in Rome at the time. The same day, 25 August 1937, de Chirico sent his wife’s lawyer a letter, together with a bank cheque for her, in which he declared: “I am very surprised that you have taken my request for a declaration by Mrs. Raissa saying that she consents to my request to immigrate to the United States. – Indeed, I was very clear about the fact that if such a declaration does not arrive very shortly, in September I will have to leave America. If you want to assume the responsibility of making me return to Europe where it is impossible for me to earn a living, feel free. I therefore renew my request for you to send the declaration in question to the following address [...], as soon as possible.”<sup>15</sup> The heated letter ends with the following warning: “I repeat, a delay could cause me the greatest of trouble”. The document requested did not arrive and de Chirico was only allowed to stay on in New York a few more months.<sup>16</sup> In the end, he succeeded in preparing the exhibition programmed for the Julien Levy Gallery, which was inaugurated on 14 December 1937<sup>17</sup>, as seen in the invitation the artist sent to Germain Seligmann a few

<sup>10</sup> A. C. Barnes to G. de Chirico, 28 April 1937, handwritten letter, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Had de Chirico returned to Europe at the end of May 1937, he would have been able to be present at the time of his mother’s demise on 11 June in Rome. He received notice of her death ten days later from his brother Savinio, who broke the news gently to him in a letter, instead of a telegram: “Our mother passed away this morning at nine o’clock. [...] Forgive me for not writing earlier, but I did not know what to say. And forgive me also for not having sent a telegram today, as I wanted to spare you the inadequacy of telegrams.” Savinio wrote again a few days later with a consoling account of their mother’s state of being during the months prior to her death: “In these four months in which Mother was in bed, with her energy slowly declining, she had a tranquillity of spirit, a steadiness and dignity of character, greater than at any other moment of her life. Not a worry, nor even less a fear, did trouble her. Mother always had the idea that you would arrive from one moment to the next. But without anguish, without impatience, like something natural. [...] Two things comforted Mother in her last period: finding herself at home, with her grandchildren and without a worry of any kind, and the idea that you had found fortune in America. Mother’s life came to an end with these ideas that made her happy.” A. Savinio to G. de Chirico, 11 June and 16 June 1937, handwritten letters, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico Archives.

<sup>12</sup> See G. de Chirico, *Memorie della mia vita*, Astrolabio, Rome 1945; II ed. Rizzoli, Milan 1962; English translation *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen, London 1971, p. 133.

<sup>13</sup> De Chirico proposed the exhibition to Levy during his stay in Bayville. Undated letter sent from Bayville, Long Island, copy of handwritten letter in French, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico Archives.

<sup>14</sup> G. de Chirico to J. Levy, 25 August 1937, sent from Bayville, Long Island, *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> G. de Chirico, 25 August 1937, copy of handwritten letter, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> For the formalities regarding his immigration application, de Chirico requested and received written recommendations from both Albert C. Barnes and Julien Levy.

<sup>17</sup> See footnote 2. The critics’ opinions of the exhibition were mixed. Henri McBride of the “New York Sun” commented: “The paintings still continue the nostalgia ‘pour les temps perdus’ but there is less bitterness in the regret than there used to be. It is like a sad music from a distance that is yet not

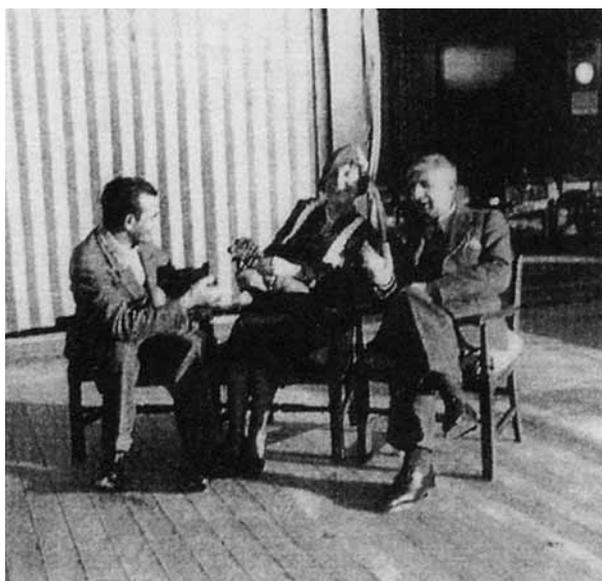


fig. 2 Giorgio de Chirico, Anna Laetitia Pecci-Blunt and Corrado Cagli on board the *SS Rex*, returning to Italy, January 1938

days before. Shortly afterwards, on 5 January 1938, de Chirico and Isabella left New York on the transatlantic *SS Rex* bound for Europe.

Before leaving New York, the artist delivered six paintings to Jacques Seligmann & Co.<sup>18</sup> Then, on 10 January 1938, he wrote a letter from the ship with instructions for the sale of one of these works, *Maréchal-ferrant* (Blacksmith ferrier), with the intermediary of Countess Pecci-Blunt (who was on the ship with him)<sup>19</sup> (fig. 2). He also informed them that a friend of his, Mrs. Herta Wagner, would deliver additional works to the gallery, motivating the initiative: “as I believe I am

not sufficiently represented by you”. The gallery answered on 26 January asking about prices and for a description of the six paintings left on consignment, as well as confirmation of the sale of the painting, adding that they had not, as yet, had news from Mrs. Wagner for the consignment of other works.<sup>20</sup> The letter was sent to de Chirico’s New York address with “Please forward” on the envelope and was returned to the gallery a few days later stamped “Removed – left no address” with “Party in Europe” written in pencil on the back of the envelope.

A new exhibition project agreed upon with Seligmann, in all probability before de Chirico had left New York, began taking form a few months later at the end of April 1938 with a letter from the artist from Milan, in which he enquired as to the gallery’s intentions and requested a contract and exact dates, informing them that he would be leaving for Paris the following week, where he was planning on staying until mid-July.<sup>21</sup> He provided them with the address of his friend, the

too sad to be enjoyable. Certain architectural forms in the new compositions have, indeed, something that is close to serenity, and, of course, the pictures in which antique horses go down to sea have the genuine de Chirico quality.” E. A. Jewell of the “New York Times” found nothing new except the “bright and in some cases dubious color to the sort of thing he has been doing for years. Here are the same horsemen or classic stallions on a pinky beach and with rather taffy-like skies. Here are the same tailored young men standing about like so many pedestals amid bathhouses and half-submerged bathers who have immersed themselves in queer ditchy streams.” “The New York Herald Tribune” speaks of “a new formal style of painting, one founded more on observation than on imagination” and of “a stronger, vital expression, suggesting the influences of Delacroix and Gericault”. The critics agreed unilaterally on the quality of two extraordinary small self-portraits. The news-clippings are conserved in the Julien Levy Archive, *cit.*, and date from 19 December 1937 to 1 January 1938.

<sup>18</sup> The paintings left on consignment are: *Picador*, *Paysage*, *Maréchal ferrant*, *Homme avec deux chevaux* and two paintings entitled *Athlète*.

<sup>19</sup> The Countess Anna Laetitia Pecci-Blunt opened the Cometa Art Gallery in December 1937 on 10 East 52<sup>nd</sup> Street to promote Italian art.

<sup>20</sup> Herta Wagner later delivered two large canvases: *Boys with Horses* and *Bathers*.

<sup>21</sup> This is the second trip de Chirico made to Paris after returning to Italy from America at the start of the year, as seen in a postcard dated 25 January 1938, Paris, sent to Julien Levy.

painter Alberto Magnelli, where he could be contacted in Paris. On 13 May, a secretary of the gallery replied on behalf of Germain Seligmann and sent a list of the paintings held at the gallery, and a contract, the conditions of which were less favourable compared to the precedent one in which the gallery covered all expenses, except those relative to the publicity. Now, all costs were on the artist with the sole concession that the gallery would “make no charge for the use by you of our gallery during that period”<sup>22</sup>. The period was set from 19 December 1938 to 7 January 1939, with a slight divergence “necessitated by the schedule of our own exhibitions”, as the gallery explained. The specification is noteworthy in that it reveals to what extent de Chirico’s exhibition was considered external, and not an integral part of the gallery’s programme, a fact also evincible from the unilateral conditions of the contract.<sup>23</sup> It is also stated that due to the considerable preparation work necessary, the gallery would have to be in possession of the signed contract by 20 June 1938; a requirement de Chirico would fulfil on the exact date of the deadline with a telegram from Paris “Exhibition December ok”.

At the end of June, the artist travelled to London for his solo exhibition at the Lefevre gallery and to see the ballet *Protée*, with music by Debussy, for which he had designed the scenery and costumes, staged at Covent Garden. The city of London made a strong impact on the de Chirico, who described it in his *Memoirs* as being “extraordinarily metaphysical” in the summer season. Empathising with Jules Verne’s character Phileas Fogg, who returned to the capital after his “adventurous trip around the world in eighty days”, de Chirico describes the “hours of profound metaphysical sensation” experienced during his stay, strolling along the Thames and stopping in front of the closed offices of import and export shipping companies: “I went for walks alone [...]. As I walked along I thought of my father, my mother, my distant childhood, of so many things which still follow me through life with the silent beating of the wings of memory.”<sup>24</sup> On 10 July 1938, somewhere between London and Milan, de Chirico turned fifty.

On 18 July, the artist sent the signed contract to the Seligmann gallery from Milan.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, he tried to contact Germain Seligmann personally with a postcard addressed to the Paris branch of the gallery, in which he wrote that he had tried in vain to meet him in Paris and informed him of the exhibition of his gouaches being held at 133 Boulevard Montparnasse, which was enjoying “great success”.<sup>26</sup> He confirmed that he had sent the signed contract to the gallery in New York,

<sup>22</sup> Contract dated 13 May 1938 (copy) Jacques Seligmann & Co. records, *cit*.

<sup>23</sup> In Germain Seligmann’s written memoirs of the gallery, *Merchants of Art: 1880-1960 Eighty Years of Professional Collecting*, in the chapter dedicated to the 1930s in New York, he explains the substantial difference in treating the artwork of the Old Masters and handling the work of living artists, an activity for which the gallery was obliged to develop a “new set of psychological concepts” and rules. Historically against working on a consignment basis, the gallery as a general line of conduct had always bought the works handled and this continued to be the practice during the introductory phase of European modern art at the end of the 1920s and throughout the 1930s. In considering the introduction of a new phase of art as an investment for the future, it was firstly established that the gallery could not be rented to an artist, so as to remain free in their choice of artists to represent. It was also established that “only the extras which pertained immediately to the promotion of [an artist’s] work” (advertising and invitations to special openings) were to be covered by the artist, whilst the basic costs of an exhibition (shipping, insurance, framing, publicity and catalogue) would be compensated by the sales of works. In de Chirico’s case, none of these rules were applied and the contract prepared for the artist seems limited to the rule of “not renting the gallery”. G. Seligmann, *Merchants of Art: 1880-1960 Eighty Years of Professional Collection*, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc. New York 1961, pp. 181-183.

<sup>24</sup> G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...* *cit*. pp. 140-141.

<sup>25</sup> The gallery replied on the 26 July confirming reception, without indications or further requests.

<sup>26</sup> *Gouaches de Giorgio de Chirico*, Galerie Le Niveau, Paris.

specifying that he had previously telegraphed saying he would do the exhibition. He indicated his new address in Milan, Corso di Porta Nuova 8 – 2, adding that, should the gallerist have plans to come to Italy and pass through Milan, that it would give him great pleasure if he were to stay for lunch or dinner. He also mentioned his intention to stay in the Lombard city until the end of October. The invitation, the realisation of which was quite improbable, is the only reference in the entire archive of an engagement with the gallerist that is not of a strictly formal quality. It illustrates, more than anything, perhaps, a momentary period of domestic stability for the artist, who at that time was not travelling and staying in hotels or being put up by friends, but peacefully domiciled, if only for a short period.

In the first six months of 1938, de Chirico held personal exhibitions in the three great cities of his peregrination. In addition, a big exhibition was held in Genoa's Rotta gallery, for which he wrote an introduction full of extraordinary imagery, in which the art of painting is illustrated with brief, intense flashes of light and colour, harvested from the drama of Nature.<sup>27</sup> The exhibitions were successful and many works were sold, as noted in the artist's *Memoirs*. Upon his return from the United States, de Chirico had noticed that his quotation in Europe had "improved 100%" and that his prices had greatly increased, as he informed Julien Levy in a postcard from Paris in January<sup>28</sup>, where he had gone to pick up some paintings for the exhibition at the Barbaroux gallery in Milan planned for the month of March.<sup>29</sup> He also told Levy of how, during his recent passage through Italy, in the space of a week he had received proposals for nine business deals and that he had a number of commissions to fulfil. The commercial success obtained during this intense period was certainly compensation, at a time when de Chirico was in financial need, plagued, as he was, with letters from lawyers pertaining to the alimony payments for his first wife Raissa, solicitations which had begun to arrive during his stay in America. It may be that the success obtained was somewhat unexpected, seeing that the year before de Chirico had considered immigrating to the United States in order to be able to make a living. Also worthy of note is the fact that in this moment, as never before, de Chirico dedicated himself to the commercial aspect of his work, most likely encouraged by Isabella, who had always been strongly interested in managing the affairs of her future husband.

The subjects of the works exhibited at the time ranged from horses, landscapes and still life, to mythological and fantastical subjects like the Mysterious Baths, as well as themes from the 1920s with Archaeologists, Trophies and Furniture in the Valley.<sup>30</sup> Even if, in reference to the paintings on

<sup>27</sup> G. de Chirico *Dipingere*, presentation to the exhibition catalogue *Mostra personale del pittore Giorgio de Chirico*, Galleria Rotta, Genoa, 12-22 May 1938; now in G. de Chirico *Scritti/1*, cit., pp. 856-857. Translated here for the first time in English in the section Writings by Giorgio de Chirico, p. 213. The year 1938 also marks a moment of a substantial resumption of the artist's literary activity with texts in which he elaborated on the impressions of his stay in America, as in, *J'ai été a New York*, *Barnes collezionista mistico* and *Metafisica dell'America*, together with other critical essays such as, *Vox clamans in deserto* and *Risposta al Referendum*. Contemporaneously, there was also a resumption of fiction writing with the first edition of two excerpts from the novel *Monsieur Dudron* (Collection "Un Divertissement", n. 5, ed. Henri Parisot, Paris 1938). The unpublished novel *Il Signor Dudron* was published by Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico in 1998 (Le Lettere, Florence).

<sup>28</sup> G. de Chirico to Julien Levy, 25 January 1938, postcard.

<sup>29</sup> Vittorio Barbaroux's gallery, n. 19 via Santo Spirito, Milan, was inaugurated with de Chirico's exhibition.

<sup>30</sup> For a list of works on show in the exhibitions: Milan (March, Galleria Barbaroux), Genoa (May, Galleria Rotta), Paris (July, Galerie Le Niveau) and London (July, A. Reid & Lefevre) see M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Gli anni Trenta*, Skira, Milan, 1995, pp. 366-367.

deposit at the Barbaroux gallery, de Chirico spoke of “works from all periods” in his *Memoirs*, paintings from 1910-1918 were not included in the various personal exhibitions of 1938. Under the control of André Breton and Paul Eluard at the time, these metaphysical masterpieces were shown instead in the exhibition *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in Paris (January-February) and in Amsterdam (in the spring).

In a politically critical moment for Europe and in addition to various personal and work related concerns, de Chirico continued his fight against the critics’ increasingly categorical definition of his work. For years the artist had fought to defend his recent production against the Surrealist decree on the singularity of his first metaphysical period. As we will see, the painter engaged himself in a full-out balancing act with the aim of re-establishing the historiography on his *œuvre*: on

the one hand by trying to have his recent work included in group shows, and on the other, by attempting to have paintings from his first metaphysical period included in exhibitions that he was organising. In a letter sent to Léonce Rosenberg from New York in February 1937, he was very clear on the situation: “The exhibition of my paintings you told me about, and to which I have been invited, interests me very much. It’s a pity that I am so far away. I am afraid that arrangements will be made so that I will be badly represented. And I would like it if some of my recent and important works were to figure in them.” In a second letter in April, he developed the problem further: “I received your letter and bitterly note that the dates 1895-1925 will make it so that the exhibition will only have paintings of mine from the period before the war, which will naturally be another godsend for the surrealists and in general for all those who try to harm me. – Endeavour at least to see that some good works from another period are included.” After suggesting possible paintings to include, he continued: “Finally, please make it so that there are not only



fig. 3 Victoria Palace Hotel, Paris. Postcard sent to Julien Levy, 7 June 1938

those paintings, which, against my will, have been baptised as surrealist; it would be unjust, both from an artistic point of view, and from a human and historical point of view. [...] I had the pleasure to note that here, in New York, the most enraged boycotters of my work are the French dealers and especially Pierre Matisse, the son of the great master!! It is again proof of my value... one does not waste such zeal on good-for-nothings.”<sup>31</sup>

Upon his return to Italy, de Chirico found himself faced with the same problem. In his *Memoirs* he bemoaned that which he called a “despicable and malicious campaign” provoked, in his opinion, by the Il Milione gallery of Milan<sup>32</sup>, which consisted in emphasising the importance of the date of a painting, rather than the quality of its painterly execution. He consoled himself however with the thought that the “snobbery, stupidity and maliciousness, based on boycotting and financial interest” of these initiatives had little effect on the inhabitants of the “pleasing city of *risotto*, *panettone* and collectors of paintings” and recalled how his exhibition at the Barbaroux gallery “of over thirty selected paintings, many of them very recent and embodying the results of my technical research on the preciousness of the painterly material, the quality of texture of the paint, and the fluidity and firmness of brushwork”, was a great success.<sup>33</sup> Beyond the chronicle of the artist’s displacements and his professional activity in 1938, the Seligmann and Levy correspondence also provides interesting points for reflection, such as de Chirico’s promotion of certain periods of his artwork as well as his technical research on which great emphasis was placed at the time.

De Chirico and Isabella spent the summer of 1938 in Poveruomo, near Forte dei Marmi, as guests of the artist’s brother Savinio, in a place described in *Memoirs* as one of the most boring and least picturesque imaginable, where there was nothing that could make one want “to pick up a pencil or brush”. The two applied their efforts to learning “the art of car-driving” and passed their driving test before returning to Milan.<sup>34</sup>

The artist left Milan that autumn a few days earlier than previously planned, as a letter sent from Paris on 25 October to Julien Levy shows. Written on Victoria Palace Hotel letterhead paper, where he habitually stayed<sup>35</sup> (fig. 3), this is the third letter de Chirico had written to Levy that year without receiving a reply. In addition to renewing his request for news of the gallerist, he spoke

<sup>31</sup> G. de Chirico to L. Rosenberg, handwritten letter 23 February, and postcard 5 April 1937, Fonds Léonce Rosenberg, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre du Documentation et de Recherche du Musée National d’Art Moderne. Rosenberg responded to both letters, assuring the artist of the commission’s professionalism and specifying that the period indicated referred to “artists who were well known between the two dates” and that recent works by the participating artists would be included. The original title “L’Art vivant” and the period including “1895-1925” were later changed. The exhibition *Les Maitres de l’art indépendant 1895-1937* was held at Petit Palais from June to October 1937. De Chirico participated with four works: *L’Ecole des gladiateurs* (lent by Rosenberg), *Chevaux de rêve*, 1926, *Portrait d’Apollinaire*, 1914 and *L’Homme agenouillé*, 1928. Exhibition catalogue, Editions Arts et Métiers Graphiques, Paris 1937. Letters by L. Rosenberg to G. de Chirico, 6 March and 16 April 1937, *ibid.* I thank V. Birolli for her help in this research.

<sup>32</sup> Gallery owner Peppino Ghiringhelli was not held in esteem by de Chirico even before he returned to Italy in 1938. In a December 1937 letter to Scheiwiller, the painter asked the editor to indicate a gallery in Milan where he might plan an exhibition of gouaches and drawings for April or May 1938: “For the time being, the only gallery I know in Milan is Galleria del Milione (Ghiringhelli), ma, *inter nos*, as I do not have much trust in Ghiringhelli, I ask you to tell me where I could hold it; are there any centrally located venues in Milan with an active, honest person where I might hold this exhibition?” G. de Chirico to G. Scheiwiller, 18 December 1937, copy of the handwritten letter, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico Archives.

<sup>33</sup> G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, cit., p. 139.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143.

<sup>35</sup> In his *Memoirs*, upon arriving in Paris after the long and adventurous trip by car with Isabella from Milan, de Chirico wrote that they went to stay in “the most comfortable, the most sympathetic, the most welcoming, the most distinctive, the most restful and the cleanest hotel in the capital”, *ibid.*, p. 147.

fig. 4 *Boys with Horse*, c. 1934

about the state of his affairs, exhibitions and travels, and sent friendly greetings from Isabella. In the two earlier letters (21 April and 7 June) he had spoken of the situation in America: "I have heard and read in the newspapers that the situation in America is very bad. It is a real shame that a big and rich country like America cannot find its balance."<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, he expressed his desire to continue working with the New York art market, asking Levy if he would be willing to host an exhibition of his gouaches and small paintings in May 1939.

In that moment (autumn 1938), one of the large canvases left in deposit at the Seligmann gallery entitled *Boys with Horse*, was on show at The Toledo Museum of Art in the exhibition *Contemporary Movements in European Painting* (6 November – 11 December 1938), on loan from the gallery<sup>37</sup> (fig. 4). The Seligmann archive does not contain any communication to de Chirico with regard to the loan, which was probably an initiative of the gallery that neither informed nor asked the artist for authorisation.

After three months without communication, the Seligmann gallery contacted the artist on 7 November with a letter addressed to Alberto Magnelli, de Chirico's artist friend who was living in Paris, in which they asked to be informed about the plans and scope of the exhibition set for 19 December to 7 January 1939, specifying that information was urgently needed for promotion purposes as a number of monthly publications had asked for news on the nature of the works destined for the exhibition. The artist is asked how many paintings he intended to exhibit and if the works were "all of

<sup>36</sup> The quote is from the letter of 21 April 1938.

<sup>37</sup> *Contemporary Movements in European Painting – Surrealism, Abstract Art, Futurism, Cubism, Dadaism, Fauves*. De Chirico's painting is reproduced in the catalogue with a brief description of his work: "First painting imaginary architectural compositions, poetic but somewhat frightening in their mysterious, cold tragic immobility, he later studied the Old Masters and his new manner derives somewhat from the traditions of the Renaissance." In the introductory text to the catalogue de Chirico's work is erroneously associated with a Surrealist technique of "automatic pictures in which they aim for spontaneous technique similar to the automatic writing of mediums" and to Dadaist "black humour and fantasy, satire and paradox".



The very same day, 17 November, probably just a couple of hours prior to receiving de Chirico's telegram, the gallery called upon the artist's friend Mrs. Wagner with a letter addressed to her home in New York, informing her of the lack of communication with de Chirico and warning that should they not receive precise instructions, they would be unable to keep the dates open for the exhibition. The letter was returned to sender with a handwritten message from "Mr. G. Jacobson", dated 26 November, informing the gallery that Mrs. Wagner was in Europe and that the artist's whereabouts were unknown.<sup>38</sup>

The documentation relative to the shipment, conserved in the archive, shows that two crates of "modern paintings" were shipped on 27 November from Genoa on the transatlantic *Conte di Savoia* by the S. A. Innocente Manigli Adriatica company. After announcing the paintings as "shipped" ten days before they actually set sail, de Chirico rushed to Milan to sign the consular invoice issued by the American Consulate in Milan on 22 November<sup>39</sup> (fig. 5). The invoice includes a numbered list of the twenty works, of which fifteen oil paintings and five gouaches, with title (in abbreviated form), technique, dimension and information on the state of framing, with the price in Italian lira. The dominating theme was Horses and Horsemen, for a total of eleven works that went to integrate four paintings of the same subject already on deposit at the New York gallery. The other paintings vary from landscapes, a still life with flowers, a trumpeter and a small canvas representing Laocoön which, together with two "athletes", a blacksmith and a large painting *Bathers*, already present in the gallery, made for a total of twenty-eight works. A few days later, on 25 November, the artist informed the gallery that a number of paintings would also be delivered by a woman around 15 December.

The six-page letter, sent from Paris where the artist had returned in the meantime, is the longest in the epistolary and contains some interesting information, such as the same list of paintings, countersigned with a number, like those on the consular invoice (fig. 6), a circumstance that makes one think that the artist kept a personal register in which he noted the details of his paintings, to which he also assigned a number. In the letter he specifies: "The number of each painting is written on the back, either directly on the wooden stretcher or on a small piece of paper glued to the stretcher." Thanks to de Chirico's numbering, a comparison of the two lists enables the titles to be identified in full: n. 327 "Country" on the consular invoice, is noted in the letter as *Ligurian Landscape*; n. 317 "Seascape" is *Marina in Livorno* (most probably painted during the recent summer stay in Tuscany), whilst n. 325, "Two Horses", is dramatically entitled, *Horses and Temple in Flames*. Thanks to this small detail of the titles, the bureaucratic tone of the correspondence finally gives way to something more interesting. The prices also vary from the invoice to the letter, not only due to the difference between the sums in lira indicated on the invoice and the dollar quota-

<sup>38</sup> A copy of the letter was sent to de Chirico's last New York address, 7 East 62<sup>nd</sup> Street. Stamped 18 NOV 1938 when it was sent and 21 NOV 1938 when it was returned to the gallery, the envelope has been conserved in the archive unopened since that time. During my visit to the Archives of American Art in Washington in April 2008, with the permission and under the supervision of the archivist, I had the privilege and pleasure of opening a letter addressed to de Chirico seventy years earlier.

<sup>39</sup> The document shows that the paintings departed from n. 21 via Brera, which is the seat of the galleria Il Milione, where the artist had a number of paintings on deposit.

INVOICE OF MERCHANDISE (NOT PURCHASED)						
						MILANO, 22 Novembre 1938 <small>(Place and date)</small>
Invoice of <u>2 casse dipinti moderni con cornici</u> shipped						
by <u>Pittore GIORGIO de CHIRICO</u>		of <u>MILANO- Via Brera, 21</u>				
<small>(Indicate whether manufacturer, owner, or part owner)</small>						
to <u>GALLERY SELIGMAN</u>		of <u>NEW YORK - 3 East 51 Street</u>				
for account of <u>Pittore GIORGIO de CHIRICO</u>		of <u>MILANO</u>				
to be shipped per <u>s/s "Conte di Savoia" -from Genoa to New York</u>						
STATE WHETHER VALUES GIVEN IN THIS INVOICE ARE IN GOLD, SILVER, OR PAPER CURRENCY						
Numero dell'opera	Genere	Cornice	Titolo	misure	Valore in Lire Ital.	
26	Pittura a olio	cornice semplice	Paese	46 x 37,5	200. 00	
315	Guazzo	cornice e vetro	Cavaliere	40 x 30	150. 00	
283	Guazzo	cornice e vetro	Cavaliere	48 x 35	200. 00	
316	Guazzo	cornice e vetro	Uomo con cavallo	24 x 34	100. 00	
312	Guazzo	cornice e vetro	Sera d'estate	35 x 24	150. 00	
III	Pitturá a olio	cornice semplice	Due cavalli	60 x 49	200. 00	
98	Pittura a olio	cornice semplice	Due cavalli	45 x 35	200. 00	
101	Pittura a olio	cornice semplice	Sera d'esta- te	54 x 46	300. 00	
324	Pittura a olio	cornice semplice	Cavallo bianco	55 x 46	300. 00	
242	Pittura a olio	cornice semplice	Cavalli antichi	60½ x 73	400. 00	
89	Guazzo	cornice e vetro	Uomo a cavallo	63 x 48½	150. 00	
325	Pittura a olio	cornice semplice	Due cavalli	42 x 33	200. 00	
309	Pittura a olio	cornice semplice	Trombettieri	35 x 27	150. 00	
310	Pittura a olio	cornice semplice	Uomo e cavallo	45½ x 35½	200. 00	
311	Pittura a olio	cornice semplice	Paese	39 x 6D	300. 00	
317	Pittura a olio	cornice semplice	Marina	51 x 41	150. 00	
332	Pittura a olio	cornice semplice	Fiori	22 x 28	100. 00	
76	Pittura a olio	cornice semplice	Laoconte	31 x 23½	150. 00	
327	Pittura a olio	cornice semplice	Paese	45 x 56	150. 00	
83	Pittura a	cornice	Cavaliere	51 x 41	200. 00	
Totale					Lit. 3950. 00	

fig. 6 List of works, consular invoice issued by the American Consulate in Milan on 22 November 1938

tions in the letter, but as de Chirico explained in the letter: "I had to declare the price for each painting in Italian lira to the Italian customs; in the event of sales you will have to pay the price declared in lira to the clearing (I think the shipping company takes care of this) and the rest in dollars, to me".<sup>40</sup> He also provided instructions for the exhibition's installation, detailing the ideal position of the two large paintings already on deposit in the gallery.<sup>41</sup>

Having terminated the various technical and commercial matters, de Chirico entered, if only briefly, into the cultural aspect of the exhibition by providing indications for the critics, as requested by the gallery. He announced that nearly all the works were of recent execution except for two paintings on the theme of Antique Horses, dated 1928, and that the principal objective of his research at the moment, and for some time, had dealt with the quality of paint: "beautiful substance, fineness and flexibility of the modelling, firmness of touch, transparency of the colours". He added that these qualities were "totally lacking" in modern painting and that he was almost the only painter (he mentions Derain) who followed this objective.

The letter, which expands upon the indications contained in the telegram of the previous week, backtracks on one fundamental point that would prove binding for the gallery: the presence of the artist in New York. The telegram was written in French (as were all the communications to Seligmann examined until this point), and the verb "to arrive" was conjugated in the first person singular in the simple future verb tense, "arriverai décembre", that is: "I will arrive in December". In this letter, which followed eight days later, de Chirico announced his change of plans informing the gallery of his decision to postpone his voyage to the spring, when the 1939 New York World Fair<sup>42</sup> was to open at the end of April. In response to the angry telegram that he received on 6 December in which the Jacques Seligmann Company demanded the sum of \$500 to be sent by cable "on account [of] immediate exhibition expenses" and informed him that his absence constituted a breach of contract, de Chirico sent a telegram on 8 December in English:

Necessity and amount advance requested now puzzling and rather unusual advise stop contract contains no reference and my presence New York never agreed therefore no possible breach stop your statement equivocal stop do you consider my absence will seriously prejudice holding exhibition now and do you wish me interpret your cable as indicating your desire and decision presently withdraw exhibition cancel contract kindly advise.

Written in the condensed form typical of telegrams, the English is nonetheless correct and the content clear, which makes one think that de Chirico asked a mother tongue English speaker for

<sup>40</sup> The prices in dollars tally with those of works sold in 1936 and 1937 at the Julien Levy Gallery.

<sup>41</sup> Apparently unbeknown to de Chirico, one of these paintings, *Boys with Horses*, was at that moment at The Toledo Museum of Art on loan from the Seligmann gallery, exhibited in an exhibition that was to end on 11 December (see footnote 37). One may ask oneself if the gallery had calculated the time necessary for the return of the painting for the opening of de Chirico's exhibition on the 19 December.

<sup>42</sup> An indication of the influence exercised by Germain Seligmann in New York at the time, is seen in the fact that he was a member of the Honorary Committee of the art section of the 1939 New York World Fair and for the second edition in 1940, he was entrusted with the choice of the artwork for the French section, for which he stipulated: "the inclusion of French works of certain epochs and by certain artists who were little known in the United States and unjustly neglected." G. Seligmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 231-232.

help, or that he even hired a lawyer, in order to defend his position and demand clarity from the gallery. The very same day, the artist sent a typewritten letter in which he expounded upon the various points of the issue, with the full transcription of the gallery's telegram as well as his own. Firstly, he expressed his perplexity with regard to the sum of \$500 demanded of him and how he had difficulty imagining what kind of costs the gallery would have sustained, specifying that: "It is more usual in matters of this kind for the gallery to make the advances of the expenses and then charge them against moneys received on sales." He asserted that the contract did not stipulate the requirement of his presence in New York, which, moreover, had never been agreed upon, nor did he consider that his absence would impede the exhibition's success, and therefore, that his remaining in France could in no way be considered a breach of contract. In addition, he clarified the fact that he had already taken all necessary measures for the shipment of the paintings and their delivery to the gallery in ample time for the exhibition. He emphasised the equivocal nature of the gallery's telegram and asked them to clarify their intention. The gallery replied the next day, with a telegram confirming the hypothesis put forth by de Chirico, that is, that their intention was to cancel the exhibition and the contract, and thus ask him for his consent. They justified their decision by stating that the artist's absence, in their opinion, would seriously prejudice the success of the show, adding that the shipment was late, as was the organisation of the catalogue, the invitations and the publicity. In the restrained form typical of this form of communication, it seems that these three tasks – catalogue, invitations and publicity – were intended as the artist's responsibility. In reality, only the publicity issue was stipulated in the contract: "All expenses in connection with this show will be born by you as well as advertising which you will take care of." As far as the delivery of the artwork is concerned, the archive conserves the Arrival Notice of the transatlantic Conte di Savoia and the merchandise, which is stamped "4 December 1938". Allowing for sufficient time for custom clearance, the two crates could have realistically been delivered to the gallery in time for the installation.

With the works shipped and information provided, de Chirico obviously felt he had fulfilled his obligations. It must be noted that there was no mention in the initial correspondence of the need for him to be physically present at the exhibition, nor was such a stipulation made in the contract. To present the artist with this requirement, at this point, was presumptuous to say the least, especially seeing that, without informing him of this obligation, he had already assumed the expense of the shipment and would now have to deal with having the paintings returned, a situation that caused him no small inconvenience. Upon reopening after the weekend, the gallery found de Chirico's telegraphic answer:

Have shipped done everything agreed however subject return my paintings you now hold and consideration mutual releases hereby consent cancellation contract exhibition as you request kindly confirm.

The telegram (12 December) is followed by a letter the same day with the same form as the previous one summing up the exchange of telegrams and the elaboration of the various issues. De Chirico pointed out right away that the paintings had probably already arrived and were available. He also

asserted that it was never his understanding that he was to go to New York nor that he was supposed to take care of the catalogue or the publicity, specifying that he had no experience in dealing with the latter aspect in a big city like New York. Nevertheless, he concluded: "However, as you feel that my presence in New York is essential to the success of the exhibition and as you desire that the contract and exhibition be cancelled, I shall not further insist upon the matter." The misunderstanding regarding the publicity cannot be attributed to de Chirico's difficulty with the English language, as he understood the language well enough after the sixteen months spent in America. It is more likely that he had overlooked the matter. One must ask oneself if de Chirico had fully realised the implications of the contract, which were not in his favour, with heavy commissions for the gallery, including an extension of their share of 35% on sales for a full six months after the closing of the exhibition, on any works sold or orders received, including deals initiated prior to the exhibition.<sup>43</sup> In any case, one cannot blame the artist for his objection on the publicity issue – how would he ever have been able to handle the promotion of the exhibition in a city like New York? Prior to giving his consensus for the annulment of the contract, de Chirico stipulated that the paintings belonging to him presently handled by the gallery were to be conserved at the gallery awaiting his instructions, and subject to this, he declared his consensus for a reciprocal termination of the contract and all obligations. On 13 December, the gallery released the artist of any commitment and confirmed the cancellation of the exhibition, and asked for an address where to send the works they already had on deposit and advising him to contact the custom brokers directly for the shipment in transit. Here began a long and difficult process that would require the artist's attention for over ten years: the recovery of the twenty paintings in transit to the Seligmann gallery. On 15 December de Chirico sent his consent by telegram and wrote a letter saying Mrs. Wagner would be in touch with the gallery to pick up the paintings on deposit. In closing, he expressed his regret for the "sending misunderstanding" and thanked them for taking care of the paintings held at the gallery.

On 16 December Seligmann sent a recapitulation of the exchange of the six telegrams, closing, without another word the incident, which had lasted ten days.

If not for the two words "arrive December" in the first telegram, we would have no idea of de Chirico's intention to travel to New York in December 1938. In addition to various personal situations and other work related engagements that the artist most certainly had to deal with, the organizational and bureaucratic aspects of a trip to the United States at that time should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, the real reason for de Chirico's change of plans can be found in a letter to Julien Levy of 26 November: "I received your kind letter. – I am happy you want to host an exhibition of mine in May; as I think there will probably be quite a lot of movement in New

<sup>43</sup> "As agreed, we shall receive a commission of thirty-five per cent (35%) on the Selling Price of any pictures sold or ordered during the course of the exhibition with the understanding that should you conclude any sales or receive any orders at any time up to June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1939, we shall consider such sales a direct result of this exhibition and shall, therefore, be entitled to the above-stated commission, even though you may have been in touch with the client prior to the exhibition." Jacques Seligmann & Co., contract dated 13 May 1938.

York for the great American Exhibition of 1939. [...] I will come for my exhibition; I count on being in New York around the first half of April.” The idea of a new collaboration with the gallerist who had already done so much for making his work known in America, was a tempting reason to delay his departure. Surely, at the time, de Chirico did not realise what a whirlwind was about to be set loose due to his change of plans, when in closing, he announced to Levy: “In December there will be a small exhibition of mine at Seligmann’s”, adding, “Please do not get upset about this, as I had promised to exhibit in his gallery when I was still in America. This does not exclude the exhibition I want to do with you, which I want to prepare very well.” His aspiration had increased: the proposition was no longer for “an exhibition of gouaches and small paintings”, as he wrote on 25 October, but rather, “a retrospective exhibition with paintings of all periods, well chosen and handsomely framed”, including a number of paintings from before the War, which he said he had found in Italy. Aiming at consolidating his commercial relationship with Levy, he suggested an exhibition including two early periods: 1913-1915, which the critics and public were very interested in at the time, and 1925-1930 whose *Archaeologists and Horses* were already greatly appreciated in the United States. De Chirico had obviously not read the Seligmann contract in detail, binding any sale of his to their commission of 35%. The moment was a fertile time for great complications, on a personal level as well as a greater, political one: “In the meantime black clouds were growing denser in the sky over Europe”, and in Paris, “the atmosphere became red-hot, charged with electricity; war was in the air, imminent”, as one reads in *Memoirs*.

The pendulum of de Chirico’s attention then shifted to the problem of the paintings left at Seligmann’s. In an extremely practical manner and with little alternative at the time, he got busy trying to solve the problem with one gallery, by asking help from another: on 27 December he wrote to Levy informing him of the cancellation of the Seligmann exhibition, and on 18 January 1939, he wrote again, asking him if he would be willing to do him the great favour of recovering the two crates of paintings, saying that these paintings could be included in the show they were planning for May. He also sent a letter authorising Levy to take possession of the works held by Seligmann.<sup>44</sup> Levy did not waste time and wrote to the gallery on 1 February, including de Chirico’s authorisation with his letter.

On 3 February Seligmann wrote to de Chirico (Victoria Palace Hotel, Paris) and to Levy, confirming that his custom shippers Hirshbach & Smith, Inc. had been instructed to deliver the two crates to the Julien Levy Gallery, 15 East 57<sup>th</sup> Street, New York. With this letter, the study of the documents conserved in the Jacques Seligmann & Co. archive is complete.

The last ten letters by de Chirico (1939-1948) held in the Julien Levy Archive retrace the artist’s plans for the exhibition at the Levy gallery in May 1939, the unfortunate cancellation of this exhibition in April<sup>45</sup> (figs. 7-8) and various attempts made to recover the paintings. The correspondence

<sup>44</sup> On the same day, 18 January 1939, de Chirico sent a letter to Seligmann giving instructions to transfer to Levy the documents for the two crates of paintings. The letter is the last by de Chirico in the epistolary.

<sup>45</sup> In the spring of 1939, de Chirico found himself in the impossibility of going to New York and asked Levy to postpone the exhibition to the autumn,



sheds light on the administrative difficulties caused by the Fascist political regime and the worsening of international relations in a critical epoch. On 7 February, de Chirico wrote to Levy: "This week I am leaving for Italy where I will stay for two months. As you know, it is difficult to write from Italy for various reasons; this is why I am not giving you an address in Italy, but I ask you rather to write to me at the address of a friend of mine in Paris, who is taking care of my business", indicating Alberto Magnelli's address once again.

Then in January 1940, whilst giving instructions for the return of his paintings to Italy, he warned: "I beg you to be careful that the paintings are embarked exclusively on one of the big Italian transatlantic ships: *Rex*, *Conte di Savoia*, or *Roma*, because they have to come from New York to Genoa or Naples directly. Please take care that no mistakes occur that could cause me serious problems."<sup>46</sup> To reimburse Levy for expenses related to the care of the works, de Chirico suggests that he recuperate his expenses through the sale of a painting or by keeping one of the gouaches; otherwise, he could reimburse him "in the sum of 50 Italian lira a month; this is the maximum that can be sent from Italy"<sup>47</sup>.

In January 1940 de Chirico abandoned the idea of an exhibition in New York "until the situation in Europe is clear", preferring at this point to regain possession of his works.<sup>48</sup> The difficulty in writing from Italy surfaces again in this letter: "Regarding other matters, which would be too long to explain in a letter, there is a friend of my wife and I, Mrs. Herta Wagner, whom I believe you know. She will come and see you and you can do as she tells you." With an affirmation that seems to be made to justify his decision to drop the exhibition, he added: "It appears that America is literally flooded with paintings from Paris nowadays. The collectors must be suffering from indigestion from them. In reality, I am happy to be here, where there is a lot of interest and appreciation for my painting. I am working a lot and making great progress. I believe that presently, I have managed to become the best modern painter."

At the time, de Chirico and Isabella had settled in Milan, at n. 4 via Gesù, after a long and difficult return voyage from Paris in their *Balilla* automobile, via the Cote d'Azur. As the artist explains in his *Memoirs*, to remain in France on the verge of Mussolini's declaration of war would have put him at risk due to his Italian citizenship.

The couple stayed in Milan until the October 1942 bombing of the city, after which they moved to Florence where antiquarian Luigi Bellini offered them hospitality. The period between the fall of Fascism and the liberation of Rome was the most difficult and dangerous one for de Chirico and his companion Isabella, who was of Jewish origin, a period they spent between Florence, the surrounding countryside and Rome.<sup>49</sup>

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suggesting that, if he had already announced the exhibition, to hold it all the same with the paintings on deposit at the gallery. G. de Chirico to J. Levy, Milan 18 April 1939 (postage stamp 17.IV).

<sup>46</sup> G. de Chirico to J. Levy, 31 January 1940.

<sup>47</sup> G. de Chirico to J. Levy, 13 January 1940.

<sup>48</sup> In the sentence in which the artist asks Levy to send the paintings, he makes a likely error by writing "Italy" instead of "America": "These are the 20 paintings that I ask you to return to me because I can no longer keep them in Italy".

<sup>49</sup> G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs*, cit., pp. 156-157. See also G. de Chirico, *De Chirico pendant la guerre*, second half 1940s, signed L. Bellini, in "Metafisica" n. 3/4, Le Lettere, Florence, Pictor O, Rome 2004, pp. 429-434, English translation, *Giorgio de Chirico during the War*, pp. 438-440.

Six years would pass before the problem of the paintings left in America could be dealt with again. At the time, de Chirico had settled permanently in Rome. With a letter dated 8 October 1946<sup>50</sup> he returned to the saga of his paintings, which totalled around forty works between those left on deposit at Seligmann's in January 1938, the twenty works sent for the missed exhibition and a number of paintings left at Levy's after his last solo show of 1937.<sup>51</sup> Before arriving at a definitive solution to the problem, which finally came about in the winter of 1949, de Chirico asked the help of a number of individuals from the art world over the years, none of whom would be instrumental in resolving the situation, including: Giuseppe Bellini, son of the antiquarian Luigi (who hosted de Chirico and Isabella during the War), gallerist Nicholas Acquavella<sup>52</sup>, art dealer Alexandre Jolas and painter Gianfilippo Usellini.<sup>53</sup> At the end of 1948, de Chirico took definitive action and hired a shipping firm to get the works back to Italy, thus putting an end to the "complication of my paintings"<sup>54</sup>. On 2 December 1948, he wrote to Levy: "I have hired the New York shipping firm Gondrand to collect all of my paintings that are still in America and send them to me in Rome. I urge you, when the Gondrand employees come to you, to give them my paintings left in your gallery since 1937."<sup>55</sup>

The artist's "American dream", which he strongly believed in, would remain unachieved. The 1936-1938 stay in the United States, with the financial success obtained and the recognition of his recent painting, must have constituted a positive moment for de Chirico in a difficult time, on both a personal level as well as historically: from the financial crisis of 1929 and the collapse of the art market, to the breakdown of his marriage with Raissa and the consequent critical financial situation in which he found himself.

On a professional level, these were also years in which the Surrealist's condemnation of de Chirico became art theory, accepted by both the museum institutions in America and the critics in Italy. Behind his proposition to Levy for a retrospective exhibition, one can read a primary intention of the artist's: that of recovering his own history. By presenting earlier works together with his recent painting, he would have broken the spell formed by one of the Surrealist's most powerful maxims: that the painter had repudiated his first period. Moreover, in the late 1930s de Chirico had

<sup>50</sup> In the majority of his letters to Levy, de Chirico offers greetings from his companion, whom Levy had gotten to know fairly well during his 1936-1938 stay in America, referring to her as Miss. Pakszwer or Isabella. This letter is the first in which de Chirico refers to Isabella as "my wife", having married her that year. De Chirico also tells Levy of his intention to travel to New York at the end of the winter (a trip he then did not take).

<sup>51</sup> Eleven oil paintings and five gouaches, left at the gallery at the beginning of 1938, are registered in the Levy Gallery ledger. For the majority of these works, "returned February 1949" is noted on the right-hand margin of the list.

<sup>52</sup> On 8 October 1946, de Chirico asks Levy to transfer the paintings in his gallery to Nicholas Acquavella on account of Giuseppe Bellini who was handling his works for the exhibition in March 1947 at the Acquavella Gallery in New York. See contract dated 12 October 1946 signed by Giorgio de Chirico and Giuseppe Bellini, in "Metafisica" n. 3/4, *cit.*, p. 347.

<sup>53</sup> Undated letter (datable to early 1948) in which de Chirico includes "a small introduction for the painter Usellini who will be exhibiting at your gallery" and asks Levy to give Usellini the paintings left at his gallery. There is no trace that a catalogue was published on occasion of Usellini's exhibition, nor was a text by de Chirico found in the Levy archive. De Chirico also announces to Levy that he is living in the centre of Rome, n. 31 Piazza di Spagna, in an apartment with studio.

<sup>54</sup> The quote is from the letter sent from Milan on 13 January 1940.

<sup>55</sup> The Levy archive conserves a letter from the firm Gondrand Brothers dated 7 February 1949 in which they ask for a detailed list of the artwork to be picked up for insurance purposes. In closing there is the following recommendation: "Please be advised that Prof. Chirico is in urgent need of these materials, and your utmost cooperation is kindly requested." The Gondrand Brothers' delivery order for J. Ball & Sons, a packing and export company, is dated 15 February 1949.

started painting metaphysical works again. In his *Memoirs* he denounced the attitude of the gallery Il Milione for emphasising the date of a painting and responded pragmatically, by backdating a few of his paintings.

In conclusion, the group of documents examined retrace the timetable of three missed exhibition projects: the extraordinary debacle of the show planned at the Seligmann gallery, a fleeting exhibition at the Wildenstein gallery, of which no documentation remains<sup>56</sup>, and the proposed retrospective at the Julien Levy Gallery. After the solo show at the Acquavella Gallery in 1947 (regarding which, the urgent letter to Levy in October 1946 reveals that he had encountered difficulties with the organisers), de Chirico would not be involved in initiatives taking place in North America until 1972 with the aptly titled retrospective *De Chirico by de Chirico* at the New York Cultural Centre. Instead, in 1940, 1943 and 1955, exhibitions exclusively focused on his first period – *Exhibition of Early Paintings: Giorgio de Chirico, Masterworks of Early de Chirico and The Early de Chirico* – consolidated the prejudice instigated by André Breton and further developed by James Thrall Soby, art critic and curator at the Museum of Modern Art. In the end, it was in America, even more than in Europe, that the judgement laid down by the Surrealists on the decline of the artist's inspiration after 1918 would achieve a firm grip.

The intertwining of the Seligmann and Levy correspondence sheds light on de Chirico's intention and effort to cultivate further possibilities of work in the United States, in which a proactive and pragmatic attitude in carrying out this plan is seen. Originally, the artist's idea was to work in New York until the spring of 1937. He then decided to stay on and applied himself to organizing an exhibition for the winter, dealing with the Seligmann and Wildenstein galleries. His attempt to immigrate to America that summer is proof of the seriousness of his plan, which was based on his conviction that he would be able to earn a living in the United States. In an interview with Raffaele Carrieri a month after his return to Europe at the beginning of 1938, when questioned about the art market in America, he emphasised a certain quality inherent in American collectors, who appreciated "elaborate and accomplished" paintings and who reject "works that do not stand up to the standards of good painting"<sup>57</sup>. It is possible that de Chirico had also observed and appreciated in America a traditionalist attitude, in modern style, somewhat akin to his own classical ethics. The impact the city of New York made on him is apparent in two magnificent texts, *I Have Been to New York* and *The Metaphysics of America*, both dated 1938.<sup>58</sup> For their poetic strength and evocativeness means, these two texts bring to mind his reflections on yet another city: Paris, in *Vale Lutetia* and *Salve Lutetia*.<sup>59</sup> The artist transformed both these cities into unique worlds, in which it is the atmosphere that dictates the physicalness of objects, which are then transformed through the indus-

<sup>56</sup> Winter 1937-1938, see footnote 8.

<sup>57</sup> R. Carrieri, *Incontro con Giorgio de Chirico* in "L'illustrazione italiana" 13 February 1938.

<sup>58</sup> *J'ai été à New York*, cit., and *Metafisica dell'America*, "Omnibus", 8 October 1938; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1*, cit., pp. 858-868.

<sup>59</sup> *Vale Lutetia*, "Rivista di Firenze", n. 1, 8 February 1925; now in *Scritti/1*, cit., pp. 806-812. *Salve Lutetia*, "Bulletin de l'Effort Moderne", 33 March 1927; now in *Scritti/1*, cit., pp. 819-822.

try and ingenuity of the inhabitants. On a backdrop of geometric constructions, antique divinities migrate, whilst profound mystery inhabits the dwellings, like surprise boxes, the window-theatres of a world of toys. In the Parisian texts, the artist speaks of a strange mechanism: "A mysterious law drives men to move towards the horizon where the sun sets. Great emigration movements have always gone from East to West." "The spirit and the love of man tend towards the West". It seems that at the time, this call resounded even in de Chirico, who since childhood had always moved in a western direction, but America proved to be a step too far, a world too different from his Mediterranean soul and he was obliged to return to the old, symptomatic Europe that was about to plunge into the tragedy of the Second World War. It would not be New York "the eternally New"<sup>60</sup>, but Rome, with its eternal call, to which he would turn.

*...oh my first happiness returns  
joy inhabits strange cities  
new magic has fallen to the Earth.*<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *J'ai été à New York*, cit.

<sup>61</sup> *Salve Lutetia*, cit.